Media, Margins and Popular Culture

Chapter 15 – Self-Created Digital Content Sharing in Retirement

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Introduction

In a period of only two decades the internet has become commonplace in the lives and culture of a large proportion of people living in the UK, and its use is seen by many as a part of daily life. An Ofcom Communications Market Report (2010) revealed that the divide between younger and older people's internet use has become narrower. The active online universe in the UK has aged as older people's adoption of the internet has increased. The Office for National Statistics (2014) revealed that 74% of over 55s and 42% of over-65s used the internet on a daily basis, a rise of 38% and 33% respectively from 2006.

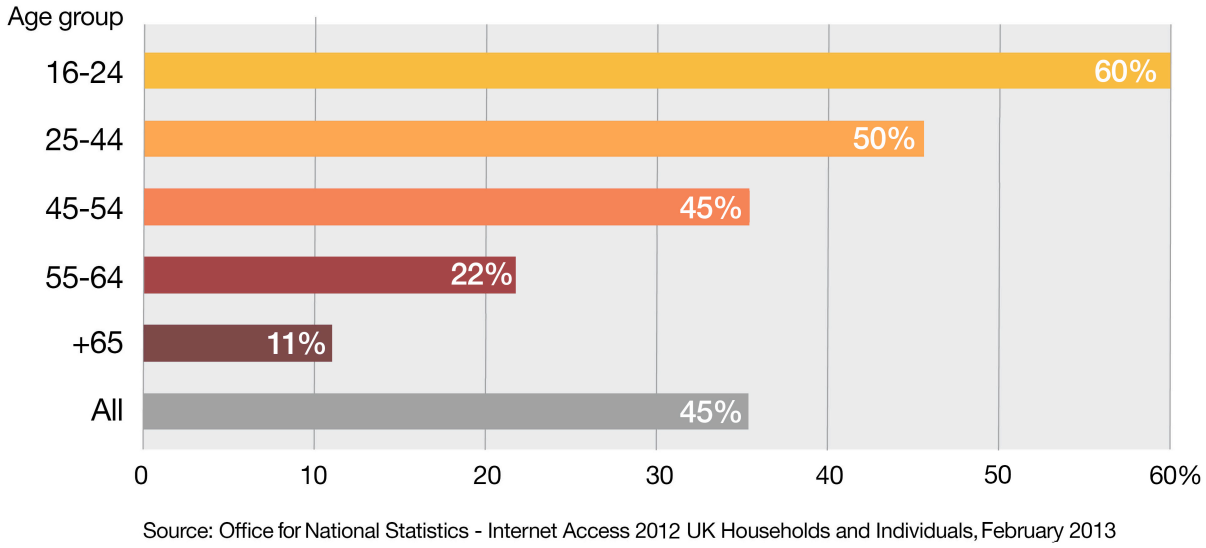
In recent years, a considerable amount of valuable research has been conducted into the impact of technology on children and young people (Facer and Furlong, 2001; Livingstone, 2002; Buckingham, 2006). This has been complemented by statistical surveys of the UK populace (Becta, 2010; Office for National Statistics, 2010). In addition, many web commentators have written with enthusiasm of so-called 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) and the 'net generation' (Tapscott, 1999, 2008). By contrast, a relatively small amount of research has been conducted into adults' use of technology and the internet. Indeed, specifically, little is known of the over-65s in the UK.

In 2014 the over-65s in the UK are a large and diverse group where use of computers and the internet is equally varied. Levels of skills, knowledge and ability are dependent on a number of characteristics, ranging from health, education and previous employment, to socio-economic factors. Evidence has emerged that this age range uses the internet for more than

just simple browsing. A report by Age UK (2010) recorded that as many as 22% of people aged 65 and over had purchased goods online. The report also suggest that a higher level of computer and internet literacy is present in this age range than is commonly perceived, and their use of these technologies may be related to the usefulness of their application in their everyday lives. Raban and Brynin argue that, 'aging is not a one-dimensional process [and] it would be wrong to assume that only the young have learning curves, even if they move along these curves faster' (2006: 43). Furthermore, they suggest that 'a large proportion of older people are ready to adopt new technologies and have positive attitudes towards technology' (ibid.: 48).

Data from the Office for National Statistics (2013b) show that all age ranges in UK society create and share content online and reveal that 11% of over-65s who use the internet have 'upload[ed] self-created content to a website to be shared' (2013a) (see Figure 15.1). Although the report did not qualify as to what constituted 'self-created content', whether this was simply writing a comment on a blog or the more complex process of making a video, this is a significant enough percentage not to be ignored. It suggests that a notable number over-65s have adopted self-production and self-publishing practices in addition to the consumption of services and purchasing.

Figure 15.1 Uploading self-created content to any website and share



(Office for National Statistics, 2013a)

This chapter gives an insight into content creation and sharing practices of a small marginalised but significant section of over-65 year old retirees who are using the internet to share self-created digital content. The emphasis of the analysis concerns the type of content and online communications resulting from sharing their content along with the motivations for engaging in these practices. Self-created content in the context of this research is defined as ‘an arrangement of visual and/or audio material that requires some element of composition or editing’.

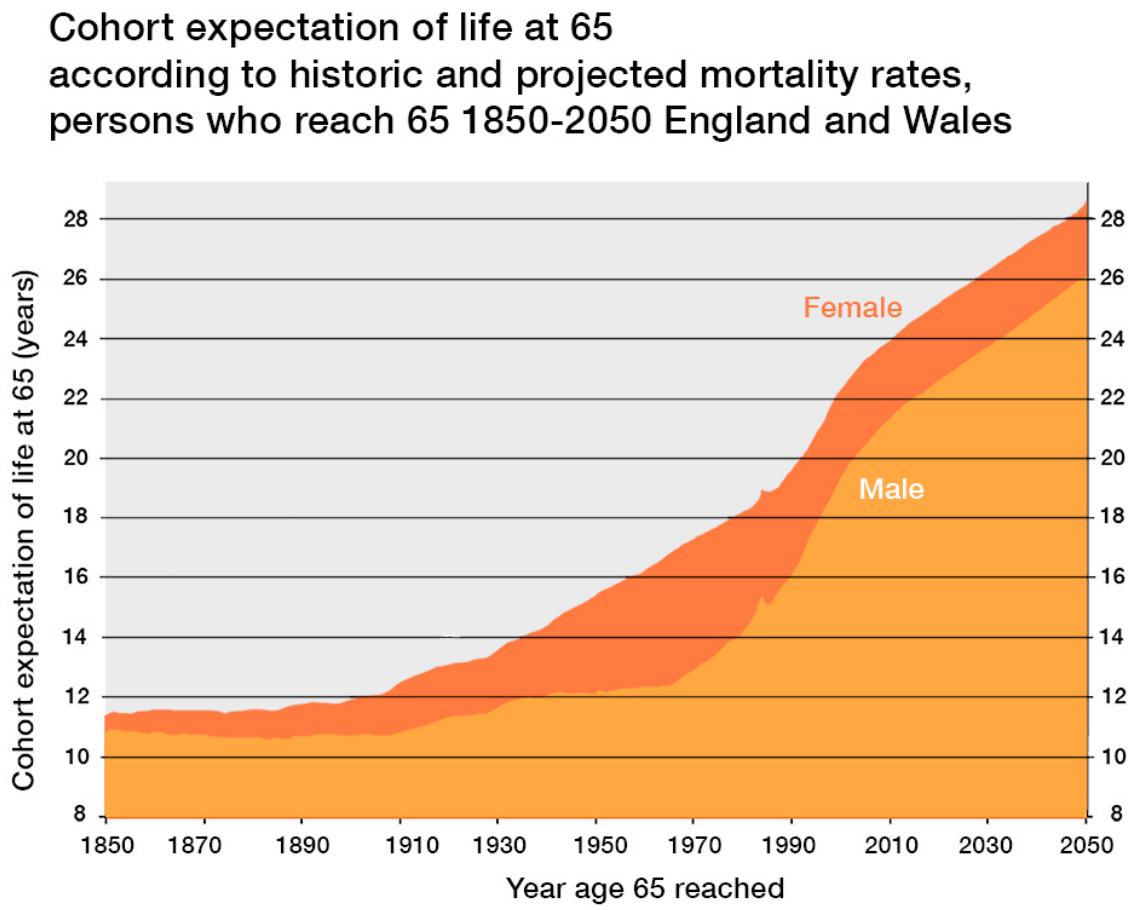
Digital text is not included in this definition, other than its association to the visual and/or audio content, as its inclusion would make the analysis of content too broad.

Perception of older people

Statistics from the Office for National Statistics reveal that the population in England and Wales is living longer and society is ageing (2010: 13). Life expectancy is rising (2012b: 17) (see Figure 15.2) and projections show that males aged 65 in 2050 can expect to live another 26 years and females an extra 28 (ibid.: 18) (see Figure 15.3). Although an estimated six

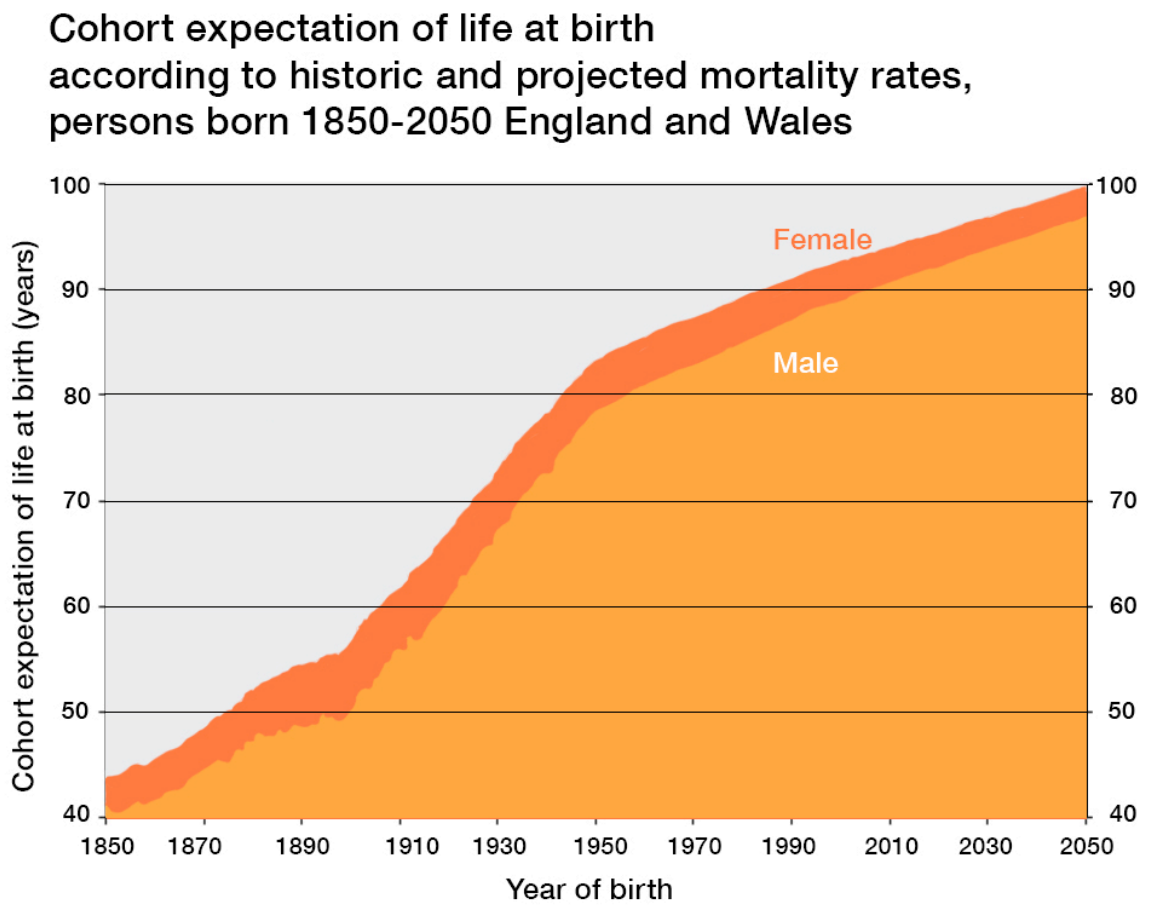
million people aged over 65 in the UK have never used the internet (2012a) the amount of people in this age range who are using it is rising and this has been growing year-on-year (Age UK, 2010).

Figure.15.2 Chart showing life expectancy at birth in England and Wales from 1860–2060



(Office for National Statistics, 2012b: 17)

Figure 15.3 Chart showing life expectancy at 65 in England and Wales from 1850–2050



(Office for National Statistics, 2012b: 18)

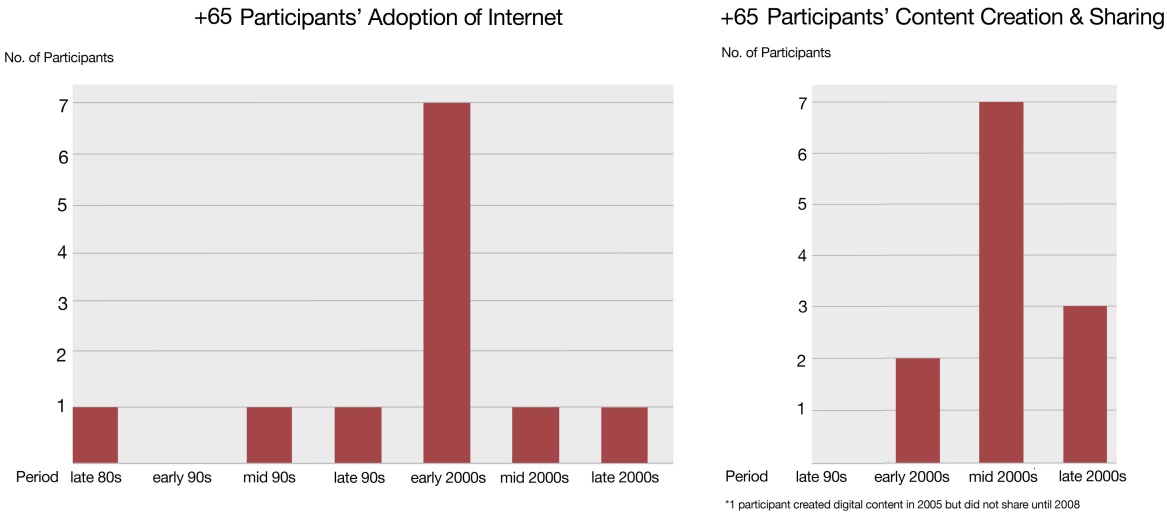
Since the early days of the web, a polarised view of this age range has emerged (Gorard and Selwyn, 2008). On the one hand, there is the popular notion of the ‘silver surfer’ as the older ‘tech-savvy’ web user (Martin, 2007) and, on the other, that of the fearful, or ‘digitally dismissive’ reticent nonuser (Morris and Brading, 2007). This has led to an oversimplified perception and marginalised representation of this age range. In part this may have derived from early research of over 65s in the UK, which found that the internet was used less for researching hobbies, playing games and browsing for fun than younger age ranges (Selwyn, 2004).

+65 Participant overview

The criterion for selecting participants was that they were over 65, retired and currently creating and sharing content at the time of interview (see Figure 15.4). An obvious consequence and added benefit of retirement was more free time to indulge in leisure activities, either to renew an interest they had acquired earlier in life, subsequently restricted by work or family life, or to adopt new interests through re-education in universities, colleges or groups, such as the University of the Third Age (U3A).

Due to the participants' inclination towards the practices of creating and sharing content, they were generally drawn to technology or artistically focused subjects. Therefore, by definition, they could be considered relatively computer proficient. However, this proficiency was diverse throughout participants. The graphs indicate that the majority of participants adopted digital and online technologies to create and share their content online shortly after they started using the internet (see Figure 15.4). This is in line with the rise of so-called Web 2.0 technologies in the mid-2000s (O'Reilly and Musser, 2006).

Figure 15.4 +65 Participants' Adoption of Internet and Content Creation and Sharing



Formal (re)education in retirement – introduction to digital

For many participants, reaching retirement provided time to develop or enhance new skills, free from the pressures or deadlines of a working environment. All of the participants had been involved in some level of formal training since retirement and these were separated into three different categories; university, college, and distance learning. Five out of the 12 interviewees cited U3A as being of importance in their re-education.

Over half of the sample had learnt to use computers in their place of work, which lessened the need for entry-level computer education on retirement. Consequently, they found it easier to pursue a higher level of digital knowledge and skills. For many, learning to use computers and digital technologies has been a gradual and necessary requirement for them to pursue their hobbies and in many cases something that they 'just fell into'. In some cases this may have originated as a non-digital hobby but through the gradual adoption of technologies within these practices become part of the process of engagement in the hobby.

Knowledge and understanding of technology varies greatly in the over-65s and is multi-faceted, as with all ages. What participants' revealed about adopting and learning digital technology and re-education in retirement was four fold.

1. Participants were self-initiated in their uptake of post-retirement education.

- This enabled them to acquire skills necessary to rediscover and explore interests they were unable to partake earlier in life, due to constraints of working, family life or through being discouraged at an early age by family members or institutions.

2. For some, post-retirement education helped extend or transfer physical world interests they were already engaged in, such as painting or drawing, to a digital form and for sharing.

3. For some, introduction to the digital domain was an unintended consequence of post-retirement education.

- This often came via an interest in subjects such as photography, where introduction to digital technology or software was necessary for successful completion and progression.

4. For some, knowledge attained from formal education has led them to adopt 'trial and error' learning as a way to gain a higher proficiency of digital technology.

- There was a tendency for participants to learn through online peer knowledge transfer (Riley, 2013).

Content creation

As previously stated, content produced by the participants in this project is defined as non-professional. These are acts of everyday cultural production and creative practice produced outside of commercial institutions without the incentive of payment. These creative practices are deemed non-elitist, what Burgess (2007) terms 'vernacular creativity' and Gauntlett (2011) refers to as 'everyday creativity'. Burgess defines vernacular creativity as:

> everyday creativity practiced outside the cultural value systems of either high culture (art) or commercial creative practice (television). (Burgess, 2006: 206) […] [It] predates any particular innovation in technologies by centuries, and that at the same

> time its forms and social functions are transformed by cultural and technological shifts (ibid.: 76).

Digital forms of vernacular and everyday creativity can be seen online in the form of popular photography and everyday storytelling through personal weblogs, video and photo galleries on media-sharing websites, such as Flickr and YouTube. However, while the value, quality and relevance of these forms of creativity in the digital age has been disputed (see Keen, 2007), Shirky argues that, 'the real gap is between doing nothing and doing something' (2010: 18, 19). His point is that once a person has moved from passive media consumption to the creation of something, no matter how simple or basic, they have entered an environment of creating content that can develop and grow. These discussions have helped define the practice of creating content within a non-professional framework.

Therefore, adoption of digital technology by the over-65s participants was self-motivated and part of a personal (re)education process. Learning institutions played a role in introducing them to the digital domain, which helped develop their technical and digital literacy and, in several cases, introduced and encouraged them into the practice of content creation.

Types of content creation in +65s

Digital photography

One of the primary modal forms of digital content creation was digital photography, which was enthusiastically embraced by all 12 participants for its ease of use and immediacy. It was advocated for its relative low cost and ease of viewing, editing and sharing of images

compared to its analogue/film counterpart. Therefore, it was the gateway technology that gave this age range greater freedom to create digital content. For five participants, digital photography was the first time they had been introduced to 'creative' photography (photography other than family photos and holiday snaps). June was typical of all participants as she found the instantaneous process of using digital photography and creating digital content encouraged her to upload and share online with others.

> June: When I discovered digital photography [it] changed my life because you could directly see what you did and put in your computer, and then I wanted to put it in my blogs and I discovered I could put it on Flickr, too.

All participants found that once they had embraced the digital domain, going back to analogue was inconceivable. Susanne illustrates this directly by explaining that her interest in photography purely extends to the digital format, which in turn introduced her to computers and the internet. She suggests a freer, extemporaneous and less restrictive way of use.

> Susanne: I enjoy the camera surprising me and being spontaneous. […] So I wouldn't be doing photography if it weren't for the capacity of a digital camera to show you the picture and allow you to take as many shots as you want.

For Susanne, adoption of digital photography afforded her with spontaneous and serendipitous qualities along with the facility for free and easy experimentation. This led directly to her involvement in a creative process and self-expression. Susanne expressed that digital photography was the enabler for her self-created content. This supports the notion that digital photography is a gateway technology in the creation of content for this age range. This view might appear technologically deterministic, since the new technology forms new

practices and behaviours. However, as previously stated, several participants in this age range (including Susanne) were denied the opportunity to take-up creative pursuits in earlier life. Therefore, digital technology (and more available time in retirement) has facilitated the motivations and creative aspirations that they were denied. Put simply, digital tools allow for new or supressed behaviours but they don't cause them (see Shirky interviewed in Aitkenhead, 2010).

The majority of participants had used photo manipulation and editing software, such as Adobe Photoshop, which provided additional resources such as image resizing and retouching. Several participants found this influenced how they took photographs, adding a pre-planned creative thought-process to their practice. Photo-manipulation software also gave certain participants the freedom to go beyond the simple chromatic level changes and cropping facilities available and adopt compositing techniques like layering. Indeed, June, who has 35,000 photos on Flickr, 'plays' with her photographs by editing them together, which encouraged her creative instincts.

> June: I like to use Photoshop to play with my photos to make them better and to [composite] them together.

June used Photoshop to remix her own content and construct new images and meaning from her images. By recording events around them in their daily lives, participants were effectively producing photographic image sequences that formed a visual diary of personal expression. In this sense, participants were socially and culturally producing content that derived meaning in their lives and communicated via the internet to their family, friends and online communities.

Video production

Video production was performed regularly by two of the over-65s sample. One of the participants had learnt the process by transferring from analogue to digital and used the medium primarily to edit holiday videos into chronological sequences before sharing with her family and friends. The other, Peter, developed his video production skills since retirement. With no previous knowledge of analogue video technology, he learnt skills to create his videos informally through help files, books and videos. The videos predominantly comprise of him speaking directly to a camera, either telling a story about his life or talking about a topical subject. His YouTube channel is a record of his life through historical personal vernacular narratives. In August 2006 he started uploading self-created videos diaries of personal monologues to YouTube with an account named Geriatric 1927,<xen>[1]</xen> after his date of birth.<xen>[2]</xen> He adopted the self-appointed title of 'Internet Grandad' (sic) and became something of a celebrity on the platform with over 40,000 subscribers to his channel and over nine million views.

> Peter: All of my early videos told stories, little anecdotes about my life as a child in World War Two. It would seem that young people love to hear about it. They were little bits of history that aren't written in the books. They were the most popular things I've done.

Although Peter's content creation could be considered untypical of the age range, he is similar to a number of participants who are engaged in multimodal communication and vernacular creativity through online platforms, such as blogs or the building and maintaining of websites.

Blogs and websites

Over one-third of over-65 participants contributed to or maintained a blog at the time of being interviewed. One encapsulated the beneficial discovery and an unexpected introduction to community and sharing that accompanied having a blog.

> Jane: I discovered blogging as a way of communicating and recording my progress [on the Open College of Arts photography course]. Then I discovered there was this whole world of mainly women creating stuff and uploading it onto their blogs. Then I started scanning [my physical artwork] and putting it on [my blog]. I started [blogging] and eventually people started finding me and becoming followers and commenting, and I looked at their blogs as well.

Jane represents several of the participants who found that remediating their non-digital content to a blog opened up new experiences and widened self-expressive reach. Three of the female respondents learnt to build, manage and create content for websites as a hobby because of an interest in or membership of an organisation. They had complementary computer skills that were acquired in their working lives and post-retirement education, with web authoring skills learnt through formal college courses, books and manuals. Diana created and maintained two farmers' market websites using web authoring software and online tools, and added her own digital photos taken at the markets. Sheila built and managed a geological society website, which involved the uploading of images and text from members along with her own photographs. Christine managed the day-to-day requirements of a west London allotment site and used her and other members' photographs to illustrate the site. Diana and Christine both managed sites that were intended to serve a local community and, therefore, did not see the relevance of networking and sharing outside of a local boundary. They used the internet to practise a form of localism by distributing local information and stories to a local community. The three people represented here used many different skills and recourses

to produce their websites. Although this was multimodal in its content it was also an altruist act that helped to build a local and localised community and embraced basic collaborative practices. Participants were asked what motivated them to create and share content on their websites and blogs they cited a need to inform and help the public.

> Christine: [My motivation comes from] a desire to give people access to information [and] keep them up-to-date with the developments of the Allotment and Horticultural Federation. I think that's the beauty of it to be able to give people not only immediate answers but also sources where they can go and explore it further. I think that's important.

Peter develops this thought process.

> Peter: I'm often asked, 'Why did you continue to [make and share your videos]?' and this sounds like a very altruistic answer, because in the process of doing it I help other people.

Peter considered the internet to have afforded him with the ability to recount and leave a record of his life online.<xen>[3]</xen> Sheila was one of several participants whose motivation was driven by a 'need to record and share [her] life'. Some respondents considered that, through online conversations in response to their shared content, they influenced other correspondents as much as they have been influences themselves.

Online communication through content sharing

One of the benefits deriving from the introduction and development of digital and internet skills for the over-65s has been the ability to connect and communicate with like-minded people, irrespective of physical location. Seven of the 12 participants were living alone when the interviews were conducted. Participants were asked whether creating content and sharing it through online media had helped communicate with other people. They spoke of how using online communications and sharing their content helped them combat loneliness. June, who lives alone, considers that since she started sharing her content with other web users, her feelings of loneliness have been reduced.

> June: I am less alone and I can share what I create and I can discover other works and they can discover me and I can pass it on.

Sheila considered her friends being divided between those who still used traditional and slow forms of communication, such as postal mail, and others that communicated with her via the internet.

> Sheila: I'm retired. I live on my own [but] I just feel closer to people. I've got some friends, complete luddites, they won't get on the internet or anything and I have to snail mail them. And I don't keep in much contact with them. But other people, who are into all this new technology, I'm in contact with them every day. And you don't feel alone. You just feel as if the whole world's there and it's there for the taking.

The inference here is that digital technologies were being used ever more as her primary form of communication and one to which she had become more reliant.

Several respondents made a conscious effort to share their content in order to connect with friends and other online users and as a way of addressing their isolation; June was typical of this situation. A few years earlier she had been forced to live alone in London due to personal circumstances. As a result, her motivation to address her potential for loneliness was established by connecting with others through online sharing.

> June: I was already 67 (in 2002) and after my divorce I wanted to make a website to publish my photos. When I discovered blogs it changed my life.

At the time of interview, June had three different blogs and is a member of numerous photographic communities on Flickr. She also uses Dailymotion to upload video. For her, the social aspect of the internet, through conversing and sharing content online, has led to her physically meeting up with some the members of her online community. Consequently, her online and offline activities became less distinguishable as they became more interwoven, inter-related and integrated. Her internet use moved towards prioritising communication that enabled feedback. This helped her maintain beneficial communication with her niche community of fellow content sharers and the wider world, the consequences of which have helped her combat loneliness.

Reponses from participants suggest that sharing self-created content provides a starting point for discussion and for further interaction with people from outside their close family and friends. Through comments and discussions of their content and being introduced to other people's content accordingly they were able to build a network of like-minded people, which made them feel less alone.

Another issue of importance in retirement was health and its associated links. Health was a concern with some participants, either through personal health issues or through restricted mobility brought about by their own or their partner's illness.

> Jane: The two things [retirement and the internet] came together. I don't think I would have done anywhere near [as much in retirement] without the internet. That was my door to the world. My husband had a stroke 14 years ago and we were a bit limited in our range of outdoor activities so I don't get out perhaps as much as I would like, so I'm very much at home. This is very much a window to another world.

In several cases the internet had been a lifeline to the outside world or, as Jane expresses, a 'door to the world'.

Conclusion

A picture emerged from this small sample of content creating participants which demonstrated that within the numbers of retired internet users there is diversity of knowledge, use and activity that is equal in many ways with other age ranges. Career experiences, hobbies, access to technologies and education have all played a part in how and why they participate in the practice of creating and sharing digital content, while exhibiting a variety of diverse backgrounds, interests and abilities. What this research has revealed is that there is a small but significant section of over-65s that use digital media not merely to engage in a process of information gathering, but to express themselves through sharing self-created content. Whatever the type or complexity of digital content created by the over-65s, their use of digital media encompasses content production as well as content consumption. Participants

not only embraced the digital domain but were also enthusiastically productive when creating their own digital content. Several participants found creating a blog and populating it with their photographs a very important way to explore their self-expression, tell a personal story and to progress as content creators. This had the unintentional consequence for several participants of coincidentally engaging with a wider demographic of web users and some with niche online communities. These examples represent an implicit self-expressive personal story and form of vernacular and everyday creativity.

The main motivational factors for creating and sharing content associated with participants in this study was the need to rediscover or adopt creative practices, which led to artistic expression. By connecting to artistically active networks of online content creators and bloggers, several of the participants were able to develop as artists through feedback and knowledge transfer. Furthermore, interaction derived from content sharing also elicited a less phatic and deeper engaged form of communication, which helped improve confidence both in creating content and communicating with others and led to a level of self-efficacy. Additionally, and crucially, the sharing of self-created content for these participants has aided in developing communication from outside of their close and established social network to encompass like-minded individuals from a wider spectrum of localities. Some discovered that joining an online creating and sharing community encouraged the dissemination and critiquing of their content through feedback, which became a self-generating learning environment. This led to the development of practices, skills and ideas that developed a greater cross-fertilisation of ideas and thoughts. Online technologies, therefore, have afforded the transfer of vernacular practices to a global network allowing conversations and knowledge transfers that were once constrained by physical location to a global network (see Barton and Lee, 2012).

Three-quarters of the over-65 participants lived alone, and several responded that their motivation to share content was to connect and communicate with people. While discussions on the effect of the internet on loneliness are varied in conclusion (McKenna and Bargh, 1999; Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, 2003; Cotten *et al*., 2013), the outcomes from this small sample of retired internet users indicated that online communication through content sharing contributes to the alleviation of loneliness, and through the effects of ill health can be a 'door to the world'.

Several participants who were engaged in voluntary activities were motivated to create and manage websites that were altruist in nature. Websites produced by these individuals for non-profit organisations were not ego driven or 'vanity' projects but public services. The primary aim of creating this content was to communicate and give information about their affiliated organisation and is an example of creative digital altruism (see Klisanin, 2011).

For participants in this study, digital technologies have been the enablers not the initiators of creating and sharing content. Several became involved in creating visual content via post-retirement education and a desire to engage in some form of self-expression through vernacular creativity. However, participants have revealed that sharing self-created content via the internet has helped build confidence, self-efficacy and encouraged knowledge transfer through shared learning experiences.

This chapter has sought to highlight a marginalised section of UK society. Hitherto, engagement with digital technologies and communications in retirement has been rarely researched beyond typical discussions of accessibility and digital literacy. As the life expectancy continues to rise in the UK and the number of retired citizens increases, issues of loneliness, social and physical isolation, self-confidence and lack of mobility will become ever more pertinent to this age range. One of the ways of addressing these concerns is by developing educational programmes and policies that encourage greater participation in self-

created digital content and sharing practices so people in retirement can engage with and build localised and globalised online communities. Additionally, by recognising and understanding the diversity of skills, learning ability and motivation of retired people, a less polarised view will emerge that is more inclusive and less marginalised.

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Notes

1 During the interview process Peter indicated that he would like his real name, nickname and YouTube channel link used in this research.

2 See www.youtube.com/user/geriatric1927.

3 Peter uploaded his final video on 12 February 2014 before passing away on 23 March 2014. The video has been viewed over 50,000 times. As of November 4 2014 his 434 videos are still available to view on his YouTube channel, which has amassed 45,697 subscribers and 9,343,755 video views.